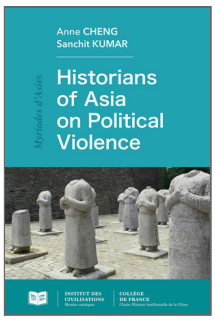

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Historians of Asia on Political Violence

Collège de France

Foreword

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Anne Cheng and Sanchit Kumar

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Foreword

Historians of Asia on political violence

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1 In the general opinion, Asia as a whole tends to be represented (and more often than not, to represent itself) as devoid of violence: look at Indian "non-violence", Chinese Taoist "non-action", Confucian "harmony", Buddhist "love for peace" or Japanese "Zen philosophy". This may fill the shelves of "Oriental wisdom" sections in our bookshops, but most historians do not buy into this kind of "chicken broth for the soul" (the expression has been used to describe Yu Dan's politically correct and best-selling interpretation of Confucius' *Analects*), and are acutely aware that any society whatsoever, wherever it is located, teems with violence, and that violence is part and parcel of any kind of polity. Furthermore, the political violence which is the topic of this volume is not just about war, it can take on very diverse forms, including, as will be shown by some articles presented here, iconic vandalism, distorted modes of interpretation, warped forms of ideological discourse, collective amnesia and negationism.

2 The illustration chosen for the cover speaks for itself: the rows of over sixty statues still standing while nearly all of them are headless tell of some act of violence perpetrated against them. They can be seen in central China, at the Qianling Mausoleum dedicated to Emperor Gaozong of the Tang Dynasty and located about 80 kilometers east of Xi'an, the former imperial capital in modern day Shaanxi Province, which has been made famous by the terracotta army excavated from the tumulus of the First Emperor. Although, strangely enough, the time when and the reason why these statues actually lost their heads are still very much of a mystery, they have been identified as representing foreign envoys and officers originating from the Western regions and Central Asia. But one thing is certain, the picture was chosen precisely to be reminded that there is no easy and simplistic explanation to political violence.

3 The present volume is the second of the "Myriades d'Asies" collection inaugurated in April 2020, during the initial phase of the Covid 19 pandemic, with *India-China: Intersecting Universalities*. Just as the preceding one, it is a collection of articles resulting from an international conference organised by the Chair of Chinese Intellectual History

at the Collège de France in June 2019, which has once more benefited from the technical contribution of Jean-Michel Roynard, and the financial support of the Fondation Hugot. As a reflection of the Collège de France spirit of "public service" intent on making knowledge available to all for free, we decided to publish all the volumes of the collection online and in open access.

4 Another founding principle of the Collège de France is to teach and disseminate scientific knowledge or research "in the making". Let us recall that "enseigner la science en train de se faire" is the motto of this unique institution dating back to 1530. Our volumes are therefore part of this effort to make broadly accessible working papers in a formalised (but not necessarily formal in the usual academic definition) state of advancement. Consequently, while some articles are presented in the form of considerably detailed developments, with a highly elaborate and sophisticated apparatus of bibliographical references, some others have chosen to remain closer to their oral delivery, with few references or even none at all. It must be pointed out that the authors in the volume, who are all eminent scholars in their respective fields, have been allowed total freedom as to the form and format of their contributions which therefore offer a great variety in terms of aspect and length.

5 Although the 2019 conference, unlike the 2017 one on "India-China", was focused on the topic of political violence, it too gathered a number of historians working on India and China, with the addition of some others working on Japan. It should be noted in particular that the three scholars writing on ancient India are among the best known in their field and we are proud to have assembled their contributions in one single volume, and that the fourth Indian scholar is actually a specialist of Japan, thus creating an interesting intersection of viewpoints on Asia.

6 The concept of the conference was initially inspired by Upinder Singh's book, *Political violence in ancient India*, published by Harvard University Press in 2017. Such a title cannot fail to attract attention, if not to raise an eyebrow, since there is a persistent commonplace idea that India is the country of non-violence *par excellence*. As the author makes a point of specifying, "what is distinctive about ancient India is not that Indians were especially nonviolent people but that ancient Indian political thought displays a unique, intense and prolonged engagement with the tension between violence and nonviolence". As an authoritative historian of ancient India, Upinder Singh is in the best possible position to tackle the subject with the necessary depth of historical knowledge and expound what the wielding of political power might involve.

7 In her 2017 book, Upinder Singh pointed out the necessity of looking beyond India and embracing a comparative perspective, remarking that "the history of ideas requires crossing not only spatial boundaries but also temporal ones [...] The fact that ancient ideas and symbols continue to be invoked in modern India makes an understanding of those ideas and symbols extremely relevant, indeed essential. Another reason for connecting the seemingly remote past with the more immediate present is the hope that a critical engagement with ancient Indian political thought can perhaps help us reflect on the problem of escalating violence in our own time, whichever part of the world we may live in." In such a perspective, the tension between the non-violence asserted by the explicit references to Buddhism in the modern Indian national emblems of the Sarnath Ashokan pillar on the one hand, and the extreme violence found in ancient textual sources of the Indian tradition like the *Mahabharata* or the *Arthasastra* on the other, appears to be central in Upinder Singh's historical reflection in her book

as well as in her contribution to the present volume. Both come to the conclusion that "Violence lies at the heart of the state".

8 While referring to some of the same sources from ancient Indian literature and inherited tradition, as an art historian and museum curator, Naman Ahuja offers a somewhat different viewpoint. As he himself describes, his focus "is to reveal the many types of political violence communicated by ancient and medieval Indian sculptures". Moving beyond the purely aesthetic sensation and emotion usually produced by these sculptures and/or the reductive ideological or religious explanations adduced whenever they have undergone defacement or mutilation, Naman Ahuja delves deep into the anthropology and sociology of the various and often unexpected uses made of these sculptures in their local context. As he aptly remarks: "Objects in Indian museum collections raise questions and the museum has a role and a responsibility to play in articulating the many narratives that these questions provoke. For all the intentions that exist on paper on the interpretative role museum displays can play in fulfilling their mandate of contributing to the development of a responsible, even enlightened public, few Indian museum curators have demonstrated their capacity to exhibit this in the permanent displays of Indian history, except to use them, largely, as tools for telling a history of religion or metaphysical ideas. There are several reasons for taking the museum from being storehouses of objects to communicators of ideas and diverse, or even divergent, histories."

9 Naman Ahuja consequently offers to "study some examples that were either made in order to normalise political violence in society, or have ended up having that effect. Deliberately mutilated sculptures, similar to those so amply seen at archaeological sites and in museums across India, reveal the requirement to make public statements about conflict and victory of course, but they reveal many other things too which we are not told about: how the conflict was not only one between the usually imagined upholders of iconoclastic Islam on the one side and myriad others on the other side, but sometimes between different Hindus or in contexts where there were no Muslims involved, driven at times not by conflict at all, but by the re-use of old stones on account of economic necessity."

10 Naman Ahuja thus lets us partake of his experience as a curator of major exhibitions such as "The Body in Indian Art and Thought" (2013) and "India and the World: A History in Nine Stories" (2017), observing that "the problem that seems to afflict the presentation of Indian art in galleries across the world is its stereotyping on the grounds of its religious identification. The division and presentation of museum galleries of Hindu art, Buddhist art and Islamic art, has a long colonial legacy, when history used to be taught in that manner." His in-depth argument and richly documented collection of case studies, culled all over India and throughout different periods of its history, comes at the right time when debates in this vast and diversified country tend to narrow down on so-called "religious" issues which usually find themselves reduced to a nefarious frontal opposition between Hindus and Muslims.

11 In a vigorous essay which deliberately chooses to privilege argumentation over erudition, Romila Thapar brings up one central issue in this volume, namely the interface between past and present, and more precisely how the past is used to legitimise the present, thus addressing a common issue also formulated by Upinder Singh and Naman Ahuja, but from a different viewpoint: "The right to dissent has come to be recognised in modern times, but its practice goes back many centuries. To deny

its earlier existence comes from the preference to project Indian society as having been a seamless harmonious unity where dissent was hardly to be found". As a renowned historian, Romila Thapar never loses sight of the specifically social context in which conceptions of culture are developed: "In the last two centuries, Indian religions have been reconstructed largely along the lines suggested by colonial scholarship. This was seldom challenged and therefore came to be accepted. The focus has been on belief, ritual and religious texts with little space being given to analysing the social concerns of these religions." In an effort to counter the predominantly theological –and ultimately Christian– approach to religion and the colonial tendency to reduce all religions into homogeneous and monolithic "-isms" (such as Hinduism, with the result that "in colonial times almost all non-Muslim sects were labeled as Hindu, even those that were not"), the historian endeavours to investigate religious practices and interactions which are often contradictory and certainly open to argument and dissent. She thus traces the genealogy of the Gandhian principle of *ahimsa*/non-violence not to some religious dogma, but to a practice of dissent which takes the paradoxical form of renunciation or breaking free from the ties and constraints of social norms.

12 Moving from India to Japan, while keeping India very much in mind, Brij Tankha presents a nuanced and diversified view of the oft discussed concept of Asianism, "a set of ideas defining Japan's relations with Asia [which] has been used as a concept to organise the narrative of modern Japanese history. This set of ideas was deployed both to explain Japan's exceptional past and chart its future as the liberator of Asian countries from Western domination, set to help them develop into modern states. [...] Japan would remake Asia on an Asian universalism inspired by Japan's past. The basis of an Asian community, sometimes seen as united by ancient philosophies and traditions, at other times justified because of Japan's advanced level of development, was variously conceived and debated in Japan, but Asianism as a concept provided legitimacy and became the organising principle for Japan's colonial control in Asia."

13 Brij Tankha traces the emergence of Asianism through Japan's growing consciousness of being endowed with a destiny distinct from that of China, and of the necessity of moving away from the Chinese centuries-old influence, thus opening up to Asia and the world. This emerging awareness, eminently represented in the writings of Okakura Tenshin which have been hastily reduced to the famous opening sentence of *The Ideals of the East*, "Asia is one", is largely based on the common ground provided by Buddhism, but with a new emphasis on the direct link between India as the source and Japan as the acme of development, therefore implicitly bypassing China. In this respect, the trip to India taken in 1883 by the Japanese monk Kitabatake Dōryū is quite symbolic, and finds an architectural expression in constructions like the Nirakuso Villa near Kobe. A more resolute political subversiveness is to be found in the works of the poet Kaneko Mitsuharu whose deliberate cosmopolitanism leads him to be overtly critical of Japan's militaristic version of "Pan-Asianism", as he engaged with the increasingly aggressive nationalism of the 1930s and 1940s through his observations of life of the colonised in the colonies, whether in China or in Southeast Asia.

14 To carry on with the task of debunking myths about the Japanese identity, Eddy Dufourmont chooses to tackle the question through the violence wrought on historical facts and the forceful distortion applied on them to make them fit into a political and ideological agenda or a national identity narrative. It seems that the Japanese obsession of a continuous line of imperial succession going back to at least the 7th century B.C. is

in fact a modern construction, and that the smooth idea of the Meiji "restoration" is a contrived view with regard to the civil war which started it and the actual revolution that some historians analyse it to be.

15 During the imperial regime, historians played a central role in the formation of national identity by defining Japan as a land of harmony, in contrast to China and Europe characterised as lands of revolutions marked by political violence. Since such a representation is replete with contradictions, the question is to show how Japanese historians faced the reality of political violence in their own country and how they dealt in general with the phenomenon of revolution (*kakumei*) in world history, in particular with respect to the French and the Chinese revolutionary traditions. In many ways, the Japanese two-fold obsession with continuity and harmony is strangely reminiscent of the similar obsession which is to be observed in today's China. Could it be that there is a recurrent mechanism at work whenever a sociopolitical entity is submitted to great pressure by the imposition of "modernity", which involves an acceleration of time and a fast-changing environment, creating a need to take refuge in an idealised past, as was diagnosed by Eric Howbsbawm in *The invention of tradition*?

16 As an investigation into an even more radical expression of political violence than the Pan-Asian ideology or the idea of revolution, Arnaud Nanta's meticulously researched article has the courage of tackling one of the most controversial events in the whole Second Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945), namely the so-called Nanking Massacre, which many Japanese historians still refer to by an understatement as the "Nanking Incident", just as they refer to the Japanese occupation of China as "the China Incident" (this is somewhat reminiscent of the then French National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen's 1987 description of the Holocaust gas chambers as a "point of detail in the history of the Second World War"). In fact, Arnaud Nanta at this point draws an interesting parallel with the French colonial occupation of Algeria: "like France during the so-called 'Algerian events'– Japan did not consider itself to be at war and thus did not feel bound by any treaties during what it termed the 'China incident'." One initial observation is that the violence lies not only in the facts themselves, but also and even more so in the words used to describe them, in the way they are chosen to minimise, if not to negate the facts. One can sense that even the most genuine goodwill may find it difficult to name reality, as is witnessed by the title of the 1967 article written by Hora Tomio, one of the foremost historians of the Nanking massacre, which for lack of an appropriate word in Japanese had to resort to the transliteration of an English word: "Nankin atoroshitī" 南京アトロシティイ (The Nanking Atrocity).

17 Arnaud Nanta's article also shows interestingly how collective amnesia manages to erase a major traumatic event, and how long it takes for such an event to surface again in public consciousness. Significantly enough, the Nanking Massacre perpetrated in 1937 was still a non-event to Japanese historians of the early 1970s who simply ignored it in their narrative of the Sino-Japanese war. It was actually the analogy with the Vietnam war brought to light by a Japanese journalist which triggered off a surge of retrospective interest in the atrocities committed in Nanking over three decades earlier, together with a simultaneous salvo of reactions ranging from revisionism to downright negationism.

18 Finally, our volume closes with a text by Michel Bonnin which has been voluntarily kept short and devoid of bibliography in order to keep to the format of an essay, or more precisely, a pamphlet directed at one of the most striking periods of the 20th

century in terms of political violence, although it has not always been perceived as such by everyone, and even quite to the contrary. Michel Bonnin deals with the Maoist period which lasted three decades –from the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (or even before that, as early as the Long March and the Yan'an years in the 1940s) to the end of the so-called Cultural Revolution with the death of Mao in 1976. He recalls and reviews the paroxystic violence wielded and unleashed by the Maoist regime through successive and relentless campaigns and "movements" of destruction of human and material resources: the anti-rightist campaign as early as the 1950s, the Great Leap forward which was the direct cause of the Great Famine of the 1960s, immediately followed by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of the 1970s which finished destroying whatever there remained to be destroyed of the cultural heritage, leaving behind a heap of ruins on which Deng Xiaoping started building the new economical order of a capitalistic, while ever more dictatorial China. Meanwhile, the question of the responsibility of the political leaders has remained mired in an ocean of eternal amnesia.

19 Our hope is that this collection of articles, written by various historians of Asia and from very different viewpoints, which cut across vast expanses of time and space, will lead readers and researchers alike to reflect further on the multiple faces of political violence, as well as their infinite complexities, so as to avoid giving in to ideological and judgmental binaries that are the common junk food for non-thought. This seems to be increasingly essential today since the 21st century is supposed to be the century of Asia, and as many would have it, even more specifically of China.

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Anne Cheng holds the Chair of Chinese Intellectual History at the Collège de France in Paris. Born to Chinese parents, she was educated in France, studying classics and European philosophy before focusing on Chinese studies. For over forty years she has been involved in teaching and research on the intellectual history of China. She has translated the *Analects* of Confucius into French, and has written a study of Han Confucianism, as well as a *History of Chinese thought* which has been translated into numerous European and Asian languages. She has also edited several joint publications and is the chief editor of a bilingual series of works written in classical Chinese at Belles Lettres.

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